

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 AID-05 IO-10 DPW-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00

PM-03 H-01 INR-05 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 NIC-01 NEA-06 EUR-12 /088 W

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R 131015Z DEC 74

FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1078

INFO USDEL JEC PARIS

CINCPAC HONOH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 15412

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS/ PINT VS

SUBJ/ FATHER THANH'S ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT--THREE MONTHS LATER

REF: A. SAIGON 12026, B. 13059(NOTAL)

1. IN EARLY SEPTEMBER FR THANH'S PEOPLE'S ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT (PACM) BURST ON THE VIETNAMESE SCENE AS A NEW AND POTENTIALLY POWERFUL OPPOSITION FORCE. THIS FOLLOWED A DRAMATIC PACM DEMONSTRATION IN HUE ON SEPT 1, WHICH, BECAUSE OF MISHANDLING OF THE SITUATION BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES, WAS MARKED BY RESORT TO TEAR GAS AND THE INJURING OF A NUMBER OF DEMONSTRATORS. THEN CAME A SERIES OF PACM DEMONSTRATIONS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, PRINCIPALLY IN SAIGON, WHICH WERE REPORTED SENSATIONALLY AND IN-ACCURATELY IN THE PRESS. THE FOREIGN PRESS IN PARTICULAR, BY INFLATED CROWD ESTIMATES AND DRAMATIC PHOTOGRAPHY, CONVEYED THE WHOLLY FALSE IMPRESSION OF A SANS-CULOTTE UPRISING IN THE STREETS OF SAIGON. IN THEIR COMMENTARY THEY BEGAN TO INTERPRET PACM AS LEADING A WAVE OF POPULAR DISSENT WHICH, THEY FREELY PREDICTED, WOULD IN TIME WASH AWAY THE GOVT OF PRES THIEU.

2. FR THANH'S SENSATIONAL CHARGES OF CORRUPTION AGAINST THIEU,
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REPEATED OVER AND OVER AGAIN AT MEETINGS IN CHURCHES AND PRINTED

AND REPRINTED IN THE PRESS, WON A SYMPATHETIC RESPONSE FROM MANY VIETNAMESE. THIS AND HLATER DEMANDS THAT THIEU RESIGN WERE MISREPRESENTED IN THE PRESS IN SUCH A WAY AS TO CREATE IN SAIGON AN ATMOSPHERE OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN PACM AND THE GOVT; AND THE SITUATION MIGHT HAVE BECOME SERIOUS HAD THE GOVT ATTEMPTED TO USE STRONG-ARM TACTICS WHICH COULD HAVE PRODUCED MARTYRS FOR PACM.

3. HOWEVER, THE GOVT CORRECTLY EVALUATED PACM AS A SUPERFICIAL OPPOSITION FORCE AND NEVER LOST CONFIDENCE IN ITS ABILITY TO CONTAIN IT. THE POLICE HAD STRICT INSTRUCTIONS TO USE FORCE ONLY WHEN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. ON OCT 31 AND NOV 28 WHEN, MISLED BY THE PRESS, FR THANH THOUGHT HE HAD THE STRENGTH TO MOUNT A MASS DEMONSTRATION IN SAIGON, THEY SUCCEEDED IN PREVENTING SERIOUS VIOLENCE AND RIOTS BY BLOCKING ACCESS TO THE DOWNTOWN SECTION OF SAIGON. IN THE MEANTIME THE PRES TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY THE PACM PROTEST AFFORDED TO CARRY OUT A LONG PLANNED MOVE TO REPLACE 3 OF THE COUNTRY'S 4 MILITARY REGION COMMANDERS, ALL WITH OFFICERS OF HIGH PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION. HE ALSO RESHUFFLED THE CABINET, DROPPING THE UNIVERSALLY UNPOPULAR MIN OF INFO, HOANG DUC NHA AND THE MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR ECONOMIC MATTERS, AND ANNOUNCED THE DISMISSAL FROM SERVICE OF 377 FIELD-GRADE OFFICERS FOR CORRUPT PRACTICES AND OTHER OFFENSES. AT THE SAME TIME THE GOVT PRESSED THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO GIVE PRIORITY TO ITS PLAN TO AMEND THE PRESS AND POLITICAL PARTY LAWS, BOTH OF WHICH HAD LONG BEEN UNDER OPPOSITION FIRE. THE RESULT OF THE VARIOUS GOVT MOVES WAS TO BLUNT PACM'S ATTACK. FR THANH, WHO BEGAN BY DENOUNCING CORRUPTION AND DEMANDING REFORM, AND WHO LATER DEMANDED THIEU'S RESIGNATION, HAS SINCE MID-NOVEMBER SHIFTED HIS EMPHASIS TO "RECONCILIATION" WITH THE COMMUNISTS (BY WHICH HE APPARENTLY MEANS NEGOTIATION FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH) AND A CHANGE IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE WHICH WOULD GIVE RELIGIOUS GROUPS A LARGE SHARE OF POWER.

4. FR THANH HAS MADE TWO DETERMINED AND PRE-PLANNED ATTEMPTS IN SAIGON TO DEMONSTRATE MASS SUPPORT FOR HIS ATTACK ON THE GOVT. HIS FIRST EFFORT, ON OCT 31, WAS A SIZABLE DEMONSTRATION OF PERHAPS TWO THOUSAND PERSONS, WHO WERE HOWEVER PREVENTED BY POLICE TACTICS FROM ENTERING DOWNTOWN SAIGON. THERE WER NUMEROUS SCUFFLES WITH THE POLICE AND A NUMBER OF INJURIES. HOWEVER, DESPITE A

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REPORT TO THE CONTRARY WHICH APPEARED NOV 10 IN THE WASHINGTON POST, THERE WAS NO REPEAT NO LOSS OF LIFE. THE SECOND ATTEMPT, ON NOV 28, WAS A REPEAT PERFORMANCE BUT WITH FAR FEWER PARTICIPANTS AND AGAIN NO MARTYRS. AS A RESULT OF THESE TWO FAILURES, THE IMAGE OF PACM AS A GROWING IRRESISTIBLE POPULAR FORCE HAS BEEN DIS- SIPATED AND THERE IS A REAL QUESTION WHAT FR THANH CAN NOW DO TO RESTORE MOMENTUM TO HIS MOVEMENT. AS ONE VIETNAMESE, HIGHLY PLACED IN THE NEWSPAPER PUBLISHING WORLD, REMARKED FR THANH SIMPLY MIS-

CALCULATED PRES THIEUS QUALITIES AS A LEADER.

5. THE PAST THREE MONTHS HAVE, WE THINK, SHOWN THAT PACM DOES NOT REPEAT NOT PRESENT A THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF THE GOVT. EVEN DURING THE EARLY DAYS WHEN IT WAS RIDING HIGH, PACM WAS UNABLE TO ATTRACT THE SUPPORT OF ANY OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL FORCES IN SOUTH VIETNAM--THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY, THE AN QUANG BUDDHISTS, OR LABOR. THE ARMY, STILL THE MAIN SOURCE OF POWER IN THE COUNTRY, REMAINED SEVERELY ALOOF. THE TWO GROUPS WHICH DID (AND STILL DO) SUPPORT PACM--THE RADICAL OPPOSITION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND THE ACTIVISTS IN THE PRESS--DO NOT THEMSELVES PACK ANY POLITICAL CLOUT. THERE IS LITTLE CHANCE NOW THAT PACM WILL BE ABLE TO ATTRACT STRONG SUPPORT FROM EXISTING POLITICAL FORCES AND, IF IT DOES NOT, IT CANNOT OF COURSE HOPE TO "TOPPLE" THIEU.

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CINCPAC HONOH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 15412

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6. IN EARLY DECEMBER THE COMMUNISTS SHARPLY ESCALATED THEIR ATTACKS IN SOUTH VIETNAM, PARTICULARLY IN HEAVILY POPULATED MR-3 AND MR-4. IF THE FIGHTING CONTINUES AT THE PRESENT, OR AT A HIGHER LEVEL OF VIOLENCE, THE RESULTING SENSE OF NATIONAL CRISIS WILL TEND TO CAUSE A CLOSING OF RANKS BEHIND THE GOVT AND TO LESSEN POPULAR INTEREST IN CHARGES OF CORRUPTION AGAINST THE PRES.

7. PACM'S MOST SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT HAS BEEN FROM THE VIETNAMESE

PRESS; PACM AND THE PRESS FREEDOM CAMPAIGNS HAVING SUPPORTED ONE ANOTHER VERY EFFECTIVELY. PACM'S LAST 2 DEMONSTRATIONS (OCT 31 AND NOV 28) WERE AIMED AGAINST TRIAL OF THE 3 NEWSPAPERS CHARGED WITH VIOLATION OF THE PRESS LAW BY PRINTING DETAILS OF PACM'S CHARGES AGAINST PRES THIEU OF PERSONAL CORRUPTION. THE PRESS IN TURN HAS HAD FR THANH IN THE HEADLINES NEARLY EVERY DAY AND, WITH A LIMITED REGARD FOR FACTS, HAS INVARIABLY CAST HIS ACTIVITIES IN A FAVORABLE LIGHT.

8. FR THANH'S GOAL OF STAMPING OUT CORRUPTION IS SHARED BY ALMOST ALL POLITICALLY ALERT VIETNAMESE. THOUGH MAY DISAPPROVE HIS TACTICS, HE DID WIN FAIRLY WIDESPREAD APPRECIATION OF WHAT ARE PERCEIVED AS PACM ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN STIMULATING THE GOVT TO MAKE BOTH LEGISLATIVE AND PERSONNEL CHANGES. THIS HAS NOT TRAN-
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SLATED ITSELF, HOWEVER, INTO ACTIVE SUPPORT FOR PACM. THUS, WHILE FR THANH HAS ATTRACTED CROWDS NUMBERED IN THOUSANDS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, THESE DWINDLED SHARPLY TO A THOUSAND OR FEWER WHENEVER CONFRONTATION TACTICS WERE ADOPTED. EVEN THANH'S LARGER CROWDS HAVE BEEN BUILT AROUND RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES, OFTEN SUNDAY MESSES, WITHOUT WHICH HIS DRAWING POWER WOULD HAVE BEEN CONSIDERABLY LESS. HIS NOV 17 PRESS CONF AT TAN CHI LINH PARISH, FOR EXAMPLE, ATTRACTED ONLY A HANDFUL OF THE THOUSAND PLUS PARISHIONERS WHO HAD COME TO HEAR MASS.

9. IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT MAY WHO SHOW UP TO HEAR FR THANH AND PARTICIPATE IN HIS DEMONSTRATION ARE SMALL CHILDREN. A BUT THEP NEWSPAPER PHOTO OF FATHER THANH'S TAN CHI LINH AUDIENCE NOV 28, FOR INSTANCE, SHOWS ABOUT 90 PERCENT OF HIS LISTENERS APPEAR TO BE ABOUT 12 YEARS OF AGE OR YOUNGER. UNLIKE THE DISORDERS OF 1971, HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN PRACTICALLY NO PARTICIPATION BY UNIVERSITY STUDENT GROUPS IN PACM ACTIVITIES. IN FACT, ONE MEASURE OF PACM'S INABILITY TO AROUSE POPULAR SUPPORT IS THE VERY FACT THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS HAVE NOT TAKEN TO THE STREETS IN ITS SUPPORT.

10. IF FR THANH HAS RECEIVED RELATIVELY SO LITTLE ACTIVE SUPPORT, HOW HAS HE MANAGED TO RISE FROM RELATIVE OBSCURITY TO NATIONAL FAME IN THE SPACE OF A FEW MONTHS? PART OF THE REASON, AS INDICATED ABOVE, IS THE COOPERATION OF THE PRESS, INCLUDING ENCOURAGEMENT BY FULSOME REPORTING IN THE FOREIGN PRESS. BUT PART, TOO, IS THE FREEDOM PERMITTED HIM BY THE GOVT. THE GOVT, WHICH UNDER THE LAW COULD HAVE DEALT WITH HIM SEVERELY, HAS CHOSEN NOT TO DO SO. STILL ANOTHER FACTOR IS FR THANH'S GIFTS FOR POLITICAL ORATORY AND SHOWMANSHIP AND HIS ABILITY TO CONVEY TO OTHERS THE IMPRESSION OF DEEPLY FELT SINCERITY.

1. WE DO NOT WISH TO DISMISS THE WHOLE PACM PHENOMENON AS OF NO SIGNIFICANCE. ON THE CONTRARY, IT IS AN IMPORTANT AND

WHOLLY UNDERSTANDABLE POLITICAL REACTION TO THE PRESENT REALITIES
IN SVN, A CRUEL ECONOMIC CRISIS AND A WAR CONTINUING TWO YEARS
AFTER EVERYONE HAS HOPED IT WAS FINALLY ENDED. ANOTHER VERY
IMPORTANT FACTOR IS THE GREATLY DIMINISHED AMOUNT OF U.S. MIL-
ITARY AND ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE VOTED BY THE CONGRESS. MOST VIETNAMESE,
WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE SUBTLER WORKINGS OF AMERICAN GOVT, CAN
NOT BELIEVE THAT IN SUCH A VITAL FOREIGN POLICY MATTER AS INDO-
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CHINA THE USG COULD FOLLOW ONE COURSE IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH
AND A VERY DIFFERENT ONE IN THE LEGISLATIVE. THEY CONCLUDE THAT
DIMINISHED AID, WHATEVER WE MAY SAY BY WAY OF EXPLANATION,
INDICATES A CHANGED US ATTITUDE TOWARD SVN. U.S. AID HAS FOR
YEARS BEEN SVN'S ONLY SOURCE OF THE ARMS IT NEEDS FOR DEFENSE
AND THE FUNDS IT MUST HAVE TO MAKE ITS ECONOMY VIABLE. THE PRESENT
WEAKENING IN OUR MATERIAL SUPPORT, WHILE IT HAS NOT AFFECTED THE
DETERMINATION OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE TO CONTINUE THE STRUGGLE
TO MAINTAIN SOUTH VIETNAM'S INDEPENDENCE AGAINST HANOI'S ATTACKS,
HAS INEVITABLY MADE THEIR GOVT APPEAR LESS EFFECTIVE IN THEIR
EYES.
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